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FDN contras: If the struggle against Managua collapses, will the rebels turn into bandits?

## HONDURAS

# Unmasking the Death Squads

The contras operating out of Honduras knew him as "El Chino," the Chinese, a menacing, Asian-looking man in a Honduran Army uniform who patrolled the streets of Tegucigalpa on a motorcycle. As a top operative for the Nicaraguan Democratic Force (FDN), the largest contra group fighting the Sandinista government, El Chino was theoretically responsible for counterintelligence. But apparently he was up to a lot more than spying. Officials in Honduras now suspect that El Chino, who has been asked to leave the country, used his Tegucigalpa base to mastermind the murders of the contras' enemies.

Hondurans have long suspected that the U.S.-backed contras were more than incidentally connected to the "death squads" that have harassed and killed hundreds of people inside Honduras. Though the government had never acknowledged any link, or indeed that such political violence was taking place, a confidential Honduran military report presented to President Roberto Suazo Córdova has now confirmed the public's suspicions. The study, which was leaked to reporters late last month, indicates that between 1980 and 1984, foreign agents in Honduras were responsible for more than 200 murders, kidnappings and disappearances. The surge in political violence, the study says, was "a probable result of a vendetta among . . . leftist and rightist irregulars, not Hondurans, who . . . have operated clandestinely in our territory."

According to the study, many of the victims of the exiled death squads were Salvadorans suspected of running arms between

the Sandinistas and antigovernment rebels in El Salvador. Others, including Nicaraguans and Hondurans, were marked as "spies" for Managua. "The [contras] would pick them up, question them and sometimes torture and kill them," says one Honduran military man. The probe also implicates Honduran paramilitary intelligence units and secret police in the murders or kidnappings of as many as 30 people. But justice may never be done. In most cases, the study says, the trail of evidence is now so cold that "it is impossible to verify . . . with absolute certainty the identity of those responsible" for the killings.

Political violence in Honduras escalated



Suazo, troops: A confidential report

## INTERNATIONAL

in 1981, at a time when the Reagan administration authorized covert CIA aid for the Nicaraguan rebels. Gen. G. Alvarez Martínez, then commander of Honduran armed forces, gave the contras a sanctuary; their battle against the Sandinistas suited his peculiarly Honduran brand of anticommunism. Soon the troubles began. In one 1982 case, Saúl Godínez, a Honduran teachers-union leader, was abducted by contras when he stopped for gas in a small town near the Nicaraguan border. Godínez was never seen again. "Choluteca was filled with contras then," says schoolteacher Raúl Sanja. "They threatened our lives and accused us of being subversives and spying for the Sandinistas."

The paramilitary activity soared in the contra presence in Honduras grew. Last March the armed forces' Supreme Council ousted General Alvarez in a palace coup. The new military chief, Walter López, promptly ordered up a confidential report on the disappearances and set out to tidy up the human-rights mess made by the contras. López's aims are as much political as humanitarian. In particular, he is concerned about Washington's dwindling support for the contras. His fear is that if the guerrillas lose more of their funding, their struggle against Managua might collapse, leaving Honduras infested with bands of well-armed, CIA-trained foreign bandits. "What am I going to do with 12,000 fighters here?" he asked last July.

Weed: In dealing with the death squads, López must also weed out the killers in his own house. Shortly after he took command of the Army, López cashiered the top leadership of the Army's Special Investigation Division, which was widely believed to be involved in paramilitary activity inside Honduras. One former commander of the division was shunted off to diplomatic duty in Mexico. At this point, a complete purge of officers who were linked with the paramilitary groups is unlikely because firm evidence against them cannot be produced.

Despite its dramatic disclosures, so the military's report has drawn a cool response from Honduran human-rights activists. Blaming the killings on unnamed "civilians," they say, is only a government ploy to bury its own rights violations. "This [violence] could not have happened without knowledge and consent of the Honduran Army," says one opposition figure. "This is just an effort to improve the government's image." Another controversy has flared over just how much the United States knows about the abuses. "If the CIA did know, it's pretty damning," says a top Honduran military officer. "If they didn't, it's almost worse because it shows how little control they have over the contras." But if the killing in Honduras is to stop, someone—soon—how—will have to rein them in.

JACOB YOUNG with bureau reports

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# Honduran Report Links Contras, Death Squads

By Anne-Marie O'Connor  
*Reuters*

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras, Jan. 14—Honduran Army investigators have uncovered evidence that U.S.-backed Nicaraguan rebels have been involved in death-squad killings in Honduras, according to senior Army officers here.

The officers, who declined to be named, are close to an eight-month investigation of more than 247 kidnappings, killings and disappearances since 1980.

They said at least 18 Hondurans and an unknown number of Nicaraguans and Salvadorans were believed to have been killed by hit squads formed by members of the Honduras-based insurgent organizations fighting for the overthrow of the left-wing leadership of neighboring Nicaragua.

According to the officers, the Army investigation also found evidence that Salvadoran right- and left-wing groups were involved in several killings and some of the disappearances of between 60 and 80 Salvadorans here.

The Dec. 29 report concluded that "it is impossible to verify... with absolute certainty the identity of those responsible." Officers close to the investigation said some of the victims of Nicaraguan rebels had been tortured. "They [the killers] would pick them up, question them and sometimes torture and kill them," one officer said.

The Reagan administration cited the need to cut what it called a flow of arms from Nicaragua to the Sal-

vadorans to explain U.S. support for the rebels.

U.S. arming, training and financing of the insurgents has been channeled through the Central Intelligence Agency. The officers said they were not sure whether the CIA had known of the killings.

"If the CIA did know, it is pretty damning," one top officer said. "But if it didn't, it's almost worse because it shows how little control they have over the *contras*," the insurgents fighting against the Sandinistas who rule Nicaragua.

Anti-Sandinista forces now are estimated to number 15,000, and the biggest of several insurgent groups is the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, which maintains bases on the Honduran side of the frontier with Nicaragua.

FDN leader Adolfo Calero said in a telephone interview from his home in Miami that he knew "absolutely nothing" about any involvement of FDN fighters in death-squad activities in Honduras.

[Commenting on the report, the Honduran Rights Commission said it had no evidence of Nicaraguan rebel involvement in political murders in Honduras, Knight-Ridder reported. Human rights activists persistently have blamed the Honduran military—especially under the former armed forces chief, Gen. Gustavo Alvarez—for the unsolved political killings and disappearances.]

Alvarez was ousted by disgruntled fellow officers in March 1984, and his successor, Gen. Walter Lopez, ordered the investigation.

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